Debate


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In the heart of – black and white – Java

Without any doubt, *A shadow falls* shows us that Andrew Beatty is a first-class anthropologist – or storyteller, as he puts it himself. The book is based on rich ethnographical data and written skilfully, not only revealing socio-cultural structures but also describing the complexity of social tensions in rural Java and the human experiences of those who operate and who are operated on by the structures. This is the kind of ethnography that I have always wanted to write. *A shadow falls* is the fruit of Andrew’s hard labour in combining his total immersion in the everyday life of his research site with the wit that only a British storyteller could possess. The book reminds me of George Condominas’s vivid account of the Indochina Montagnards back in the pre US-Vietnam war period, *We have eaten the forest*, and James Herriot’s lovely stories about the Yorkshire farmers he encountered during his career as a veterinary surgeon. Indeed, *A shadow falls* is presented as literary writing rather than as a conventional academic ethnography. Here I share Andrew’s view that an ethnographer is actually a storyteller, albeit bound to the rule of not creating his own social events and actors. Whatever the label and whatever claim we anthropologists put forward, our ethnographical and theoretical accounts will in the end circulate and function in human discourse as stories.

Writing *A shadow falls* as a literary work gives Andrew at least two advantages – as well as some drawbacks. First, ample space to fully explore the richness of humanity of a rural community. Second, the opportunity to make maximum use of the old anthropological adage of presenting culture ‘from the native’s point of view’. In Andrew’s hands nearly every person in *A shadow falls* is presented as a complete human being, with physical traits, material and social status, even idiosyncrasies. They come to us not just as nameless, faceless puppets subjected to the scholar’s dominating, unchallengeable structures, but as proper human beings and social subjects.
One thing that distinguishes anthropology from other academic endeavours is that in this discipline we heartily accept the fact that our research subjects are capable of putting forward their own arguments and rationalities to make their actions understood and make sense to other people – including anthropologists and readers. In this respect, Andrew has certainly harvested a success. By presenting the villagers’ experiences, their actions, their talk, Andrew appropriately provides readers of his book with a precious opportunity to understand why his informants behave in certain ways according to their own account. Without burdening readers with complicated concepts, A shadow falls stands as a crystal-clear window for us to view the turbulence in Bayu, a rural village in the easternmost corner of Java, where the old, inclusive religious practices became a sitting duck for an incessant barrage by hardline Islam, or perhaps, to be more precise, by born-again Muslims propagating principles intolerant of other people’s ways of life. Without burdening us with bombastic academic debates, Andrew takes his readers to the inner feelings and minds of the people of Bayu; we hear of Pujil’s and Wan’s desire to impress their new foreign friend with a macho image of Banyuwangi by introducing him to the local ‘dens of iniquity’; and of Pak Lurah’s shattered heart and health after he is openly humiliated as a ‘Satan follower’ by a radical preacher speaking in the village mosque.

Just as a good literary work should, A shadow falls is brimming with empathy to enrich its readers with understanding of why people do what they do, without the author wasting his breath to give his own answers. In the same stroke, however, this is also a drawback. An ethnography should aim not only to describe how people strip their shirts and bicker over a cool spot under a shady tree in response to heat. To a large extent an ethnography is also obliged to provide a proper account of why daily temperature increases, which in many cases is beyond the bickering parties’ knowledge but accessible to the ethnographer. Andrew provides us with a first-rate description of what is going on in Bayu, but apparently he is reluctant to look into the deeper roots that in one way or another make that social drama possible. A shadow falls is rich in empathy, yet lacks the power of explanation. The result is, as can be read in its last chapter, that Andrew gives us no conclusion at all.

As an ethnography, A shadow falls shares an essential trait with other anthropological works representing culture and society from the point of view of that society’s own members. Here Andrew has launched an all-out effort to transport the views of his friends in Bayu from a very local village environment to a world stage where those views can be shared with a wider audience. What makes this work special, however, is that it deals with social tensions that sometimes flare up into open and harsh frictions – and not just the economic practices, kinship networks, and religious beliefs that ethnographies usually deal with. Researching social tensions is like walking
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a tightrope, but researching social tensions from the bickering parties’ own points of view is like walking a greased tightrope. Balance must be kept at all times, at any cost, from the beginning till the end. As a seasoned ethnographer, Andrew must be aware of this basic principle. Ethnographers are not boy scouts, who are supposed to be friends of all humankind. On the other hand ethnographers are not supposed to be partisan either; they should not take sides or make enemies among the people in their research site. But here Andrew fails; he takes sides and he pays for it dearly.

Drawn closer to the mystics, so close that he participates as a member, Andrew positions himself as an enemy of Drus and his circle of born-again Muslims. Drawn closer to the majority of the villagers, Andrew positions himself against Sri, whose sour marriage has led her to cover her face and her life from her neighbours with a piece of dark veil. Of course it is Andrew’s right to go to the mystics’ chanting sessions, whether as an observer or as a participant, but by becoming a member Andrew has clearly severed his social path and empathy to Drus and his party. By taking sides with the Bayu majority, Andrew drifts farther and farther from Sri and loses his empathy for her. Actually, Andrew still has wide access to Sri, through Sofia and Mercedes, his daughter and his wife, but without empathy what is the use of access in ethnographic research?

By taking sides, Andrew loses his opportunity – and perhaps his will, too – to approach and get proper data from Drus, Sri, and the circle of born-again Muslims; and without proper data there is not much an ethnographer can tell us about his research subjects. Although he is no less a villager than the other villagers of Bayu, Drus has been reduced to the simple category of enemy, to whom Andrew feels no need even to say hello. Although her self-seclusion behind the dark veil is no less isolating than the mystics’ self-seclusion in the darkness of Alas Purwo, poor Sri has been reduced to the level of ghost, physically present but socially absent, and she is not just an ordinary ghost but an offending one.

By taking distance and severing his path to the born-again Muslims, Andrew loses his golden opportunity to gain insight into the complexity of causes, reasons and perhaps hopelessness behind Drus and Sri and other non-conformists. Without seeing the complexity, all Andrew can possibly do is to paint Drus and Sri merely as black figures to be contrasted with the white figures of other villagers. A shadow falls shares a similar fate with Javanese shadow plays, where the complexity of human lives is simplified into a black-and-white opposition – evil Korawa and good Pandawa families, in the case of the shadow play; born-again Muslims versus traditionalists in the case of A shadow falls. Had Andrew been patient enough to put up with Drus’s and Sri’s antics, A shadow falls would certainly have been able to enrich its readers with a finer understanding of the ideological turbulence in rural Java, as all
sides enmeshed in the turbulence would have received the equal ethnograph-
ic treatment they deserved.

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Pluralism and cultural cleansing in East Java

In recent decades the field of anthropology has witnessed a pronounced de-
cline in empirically grounded village studies (concerned with documenting
‘folk traditions’, for example) and a growing emphasis on projects with an ur-
ban, national, or transnational focus. These efforts to transcend the parochial-
ism of anthropology as it was practised in earlier times have been salutary in
many respects, as has the impetus in some quarters toward the development
of an explicitly historical anthropology. Unfortunately, however, these and
attendant trends have often gone hand in hand with a diminished concern
with the methodologies of sustained participant observation that undergird-
ed many earlier ethnographies. A largely unintended consequence of these
shifts, one amplified by the burgeoning scholarly interest since the Iranian
revolution in ‘political Islam’ and its real and imagined spin-offs, is the rela-
tive dearth of comprehensive, empirically-based perspectives on the daily so-
cial practices and quotidian concerns of ‘ordinary Muslims’ in contemporary
Indonesia and other Muslim-majority nations. This situation is all the more
regrettable in light of the widely redounding transformations and polariza-
tions that have occurred in Indonesia and throughout the Muslim world in
the past few decades and the clear need (especially since September 11) for
anthropological scholarship on Muslims and their communities that is at once
empirically robust and theoretically sophisticated, as well as appropriately
reflexive and empathetic.

How do ‘ordinary Muslims’ in Indonesia and elsewhere organize, expe-
rience, and make sense of their daily lives? What kinds of ritual discipline,
piety, and religiosity do they valorize and embody? How do they manage
their kinship and other social roles while also honouring the daily commit-
ments associated with their formal and informal occupational activities and
their identities, aspirations, and moral and ethical strivings as Muslims? And,
more generally, what kinds of interpersonal skills and other social and cul-
tural resources do they draw upon as they negotiate the various axes of dif-
ference and inequality that structure their lives and inform the textures and
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Andrew Beatty’s beautifully written and deeply incisive if somewhat quirky *A shadow falls; In the heart of Java* addresses issues of this sort for the Banyuwangi regency of East Java (formerly a part of the Sivaite kingdom of Blambangan, which was once a province of the Hindu-Buddhist state of Majapahit), where he conducted two-and-a-half years of ethnographic fieldwork in the 1990s. The first period of fieldwork (1991-1993) served as the basis for his *Varieties of Javanese religion; An anthropological account*, which is noteworthy for elucidating the deep structures (at once cognitive and metaphysical) underlyng social and cultural conventions conducive to certain kinds of conceptual and moral relativism that with a few notable exceptions (such as the 1965 mass killings) have long encouraged villagers in Banyuwangi to accord legitimacy to various kinds of human difference. The second stint of fieldwork (1996-1997) provided most of the material for *A shadow falls*, which focuses on the changes that occurred in the village of Bayu (a pseudonym) during Beatty’s three-year absence from the field. Both books stand as brilliant affirmations of the enduring value of the ‘deep hanging out’ that for nearly a century now has been the sine qua non of the anthropological enterprise. Additionally, both books make clear that Beatty is a gifted ethnographer who has finely-honed observational skills and an unwavering commitment to listening carefully to the complex tonalities of his interlocutors’ speech as well as the silences, elisions, and ambivalences entailed in their public presentations of self and their fluid subjectivities.

The two books are nonetheless very different in style, substance, and tone. In terms of scholarly trappings, for example, *Varieties of Javanese religion* is fairly conventional, containing as it does voluminous in-text citations and bibliographic references, and extensive commentary about the book’s conceptual and theoretical orientation, including its relationship to previous anthropological scholarship on religion in Java (and a good deal else). In *A shadow falls*, by contrast, Beatty dispenses with all of these scholarly accoutrements – he makes no mention of other anthropologists or any scholarly literature, save a fleeting reference to Bronislaw Malinowski on page 134 and another on the same page to Claude Lévi-Strauss. He prefers instead to convey his observations and experiences in the form of a novel or memoir from the field that is reminiscent of (and easily holds it own in relation to) fieldwork-based literary classics such as Eleanor Smith Bowen’s *Return to laughter* and Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa*. The most dramatic contrast between Beatty’s two volumes though is one of tone, not style (or substance). *Varieties of Javanese religion* is quite upbeat and optimistic about pluralism and its likely future(s) in East Java. This despite the observation toward the end of the book that Islamist sensibilities and dispositions were gaining traction and institutional backing (due partly to state policies and other mostly exogenous forces) in
the mid-to-late 1990s, and posed a considerable threat to the extensive rural Javanese supports for conceptual and moral relativism that were grounded both in myth, ritual, and cosmology, and in domestic and social-structural arrangements (involving widespread fosterage and adoption, relatively high rates of separation, divorce, and remarriage, and so on).

A shadow falls, by contrast, strikes me as deeply pessimistic not only about the social and cultural processes that unfolded in the village over the decade in question, but also about future scenarios elsewhere in the archipelago and the Muslim world at large, even though Beatty remarks near the end of Varieties of Javanese religion that ‘not too much, perhaps, should be made of the changes we observed’ during the second period of fieldwork (p. 240). And while Beatty still finds much in Banyuwangi – and in his relationships with particular individuals – that is both charming and deeply meaningful to him as a chronicler of the human condition and an advocate of pluralism, he also conveys a pronounced sense of alienation from village life or at least some of its increasingly salient dynamics. Is this because the florescence of cultural diversity and the legitimacy customarily accorded various kinds of difference – along with the rich abangan/kejawan traditions documented for other regions of Java by Geertz, Koentjaraningrat, Hefner, Woodward, and others – that so marked the earlier period of fieldwork were conspicuously less evident on his return to the field? (As anthropologists, after all, we are both occupationally and temperamentally prone to defend and celebrate diversity, just as – perhaps equally reflexively – we are inclined to lament its decline.) Or is it due instead to culturally interlocking but analytically distinct dynamics, such as the puritanical, censorious, and unecumenical tenor of the resurgent Islam that has gained traction in Banyuwangi (and elsewhere in Java), and to the fact that its proponents, in emphasizing public and social forms of orthodox piety over Javanist mystical traditions that privilege interior states, seem intent on widespread cultural cleansing that brings customarily muted differences and controversies to the fore?

The ascendant variant of Islam that Beatty documents does in any event come across as relatively monochromatic. And it is typically embraced, we are told, due to uncertainties and fears bred by the destabilization of identities and the growing if diffuse sense of menace experienced in Banyuwangi and throughout the archipelago in the final years of Suharto’s New Order (1996-1998), rather than because it engages its adherents through new forms of piety or religiosity that they find morally and ethically meaningful. Issues of agency (exercised by the “newly pious”) are thus largely glossed over in this context, though they are documented with considerable insight in many other settings, as, for instance, when a group of villagers resists efforts on the part of more orthodox Muslims to crank up the volume of prayer-house loudspeakers to ear-splitting levels so as to more widely disseminate their
predawn warnings about apocalypse and damnation (Chapter 20). The larger theme here is that, on Beatty’s telling, the exercise of agency appears to come into play chiefly when residents of Banyuwangi resist certain kinds of normalizing forces, not when they embrace them to cultivate new modalities of the self. Research in other areas of Java and elsewhere in the Muslim world indicates that such depictions do not make adequate provision for an increasingly important range of modern Muslim subjectivities (Mahmood 2005; Smith-Hefner 2007).

Tropes of (unilinear) decline – encompassing the decline of diversity, of tolerance, and of pluralism generally – loom large in a good many of the vignettes Beatty presents, especially in the second half of the book, and might be said to inform the narrative structure of the volume as a whole. Yet elsewhere Beatty makes clear that, whatever the time frame, political and religious developments in Java (entailing scripturalism; ‘internal [and other] conversion’; brutal murders of suspected sorcerers, witches, and political opponents; and much else) have rarely followed a unilinear trajectory, and are commonly characterized by historical reversals, counter-currents, and non-linear ebbs and flows of various kinds. On a related note: one wonders what exactly Beatty sought to evoke by the somewhat cryptic title he gave his book. Dictionary definitions of the term ‘shadow’ include references to the shaded part of a picture and partial or complete darkness. More figuratively, the term suggests an expression of perplexity, sadness, or gloom (as when a shadow crosses someone’s face), ominous oppressiveness, or something insubstantial or fleeting (as in a freedom that proved more shadow than substance). Finally, in certain mythological and cosmological contexts, shadows are symbols or signs of God’s presence around an object. While this last meaning is probably not the one Beatty had in mind when he chose the book’s title, it is not clear if he envisions the shadow and darkness falling in the heart of Java as fleeting or as rather long-term, even permanent. One also wonders if Beatty sees any silver lining or grounds for optimism as he contemplates the passing of a turbulent decade and its implications for Java’s future.

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Breaking the silence

After earning his PhD degree at Oxford University with an anthropological study on Nias, Andrew Beatty decided to conduct fieldwork in an East Javanese village called Bayu (pseudonym), from December 1991 to June 1993 and again from April 1996 to April 1997. His experiences form the basis of two totally different books, the first being a scholarly monograph, published in 1999 by Cambridge University Press, and the second being a personal travel story, written for a broad reading public, brought out in 2009 by the non-academic publisher Faber & Faber. Remarkably, writing in 1999, Beatty presented a positive viewpoint, whereas ten years later his tone has become pessimistic, concluding on a decidedly negative note.

In Varieties of Javanese religion (1999), Beatty wanted to show how ‘Java’ coped with cultural pluralism and with ‘the challenges to personal identity, mutual tolerance, and social harmony that it presents’ (p. 1). This work fitted neatly within the then prevailing paradigm that striving for harmony was the foundation of Javanese culture. In 2009, Beatty revisits his old field notes, but now under the menacing title A shadow falls; In the heart of Java. This book is a kind of travelogue in which the author wears his heart on his sleeve. He becomes intensely involved emotionally when a few Islamic hardliners suddenly disturb the bucolic peace and quiet of ‘his’ village. Whereas the first book painted a picture of a diverse community living in harmony, in which only towards the end (pp. 240-8) is something told about the ‘sudden’ and ‘disturbing’ phenomenon of resurgent Islam, the second book tells a scare-mongering story about Islam. Beatty wishes us to believe that in only three years’ time a radical transformation has taken place. Again, Java is said to have ‘lessons for
us all’ (p. x), but no longer ones about happy multiculturalism.

Whatever may have happened in Java, in any case something fundamental had meanwhile happened to the way Western academics viewed Indonesia: after Suharto’s downfall in 1998, they began to write about ‘a country in despair’, and by 2009 entire bookshelves could be filled with studies on the ‘roots of violence’. Faber and Faber identifies multiculturalism and the diversity of civilizations as themes of Beatty’s 2009 book, but worryingly in combination with extremism, violence and, unsurprisingly in the post-11 September era, the bogeyman ‘Islam’.1

A religiously oriented thriller, A shadow falls is pleasantly written, anecdotal and chatty. However, I am not convinced by Beatty’s claim that, unlike a novelist, he is not inventing or imagining, and that he is merely letting the Javanese characters ‘show us what matters’ (p. x). For example, concerning fasting in Islam, Beatty opines that the reason some ‘quite ordinary folk’ worship by abstention is because they ‘derive some consolation from the discipline’ (p. 82). In order to bolster his argument, he provides the following anecdote: “‘It helps me understand the hardships of the poor,’ said a poor man in eastern Bayu when I asked him why he fasted. ‘I feel I share in their suffering.’ ‘Fasting dampens the passions,’ said his wife sadly.” (p. 82.)

Although what this informant said may sound funny to non-believers, I think that he was merely reiterating the rote reply taught in catechism. Beatty presents us the standardized explanations given by the couple as a joke, in which the woman’s ‘sad’ comment functions as the punch line. However, I am deeply sceptical about Beatty’s representation of her voice. I think that she, too, was just stating an elementary theological point. Rather than sadly hinting at the denied possibility of steamy nights of passion, she was indirectly referring to a Quranic admonition (79:40), where the faithful are warned to curb their ‘passions’ or ‘desires’.

The book is full of stories about the humdrum of daily village life, spiced by direct dialogue. The latter artifice belongs firmly to the domain of imagination, because it is beyond the reach of the human mind to recall the exact words of conversations, even when they happened minutes before, but Beatty assures us that the dialogues ‘though edited, were recorded or written down shortly after they occurred’ (p. x). It would be churlish of me to comment on the author’s appeal to intellectual honesty.

The title A shadow falls; In the heart of Java employs two archetypical metaphors, both suggesting that a dark threat is looming over Java. Firstly, we have the light-dark image of a shadow, with its strong positive and negative associations. The shadow here is cast by ‘a harsh and puritanical Islamism’ (blurb). Secondly, the arresting light-dark contrast is coupled with the image

1 See the publisher’s website at http://www.faber.co.uk/work/shadow-falls/9780571235865/, last accessed on May 5, 2010.
of the heart, alluding to the related metaphor ‘heart of darkness’ with its connotations of fear and evil, constructing Java as a place of doom. But is Bayu, a backwater village in the easternmost part of Java, really Java’s heart?

In the preface Beatty claims that Java is the heart of Indonesia, implying that the developments he observed in rural Java bode ill for Indonesia as a whole. As he dramatically puts it: ‘Indonesia, the largest and most diverse Muslim nation – with Java at its heart – shows us better than anywhere how to live peacefully with cultural difference. That diversity and respect for pluralism are now under threat. Almost uniquely in the Muslim world, Java still has the cultural means to confront the challenge. It has lessons for us all.’ (p. x). Beatty seems to suggest that a ‘heart attack’ will lead to the ‘death’ of the Indonesian ‘body politic’ as we know it.

The book is divided into two parts, in which the passage from light to dark is narrated. Part One describes the author’s first fieldwork period, telling about ‘an island where people of radically different ideology […] managed to live in harmony’ (p. ix). Part Two describes how a ‘puritan, ideologically driven Islam had made rapid progress, pushing aside older traditions, disturbing an ancient pact’ (p. ix). Suddenly, Shangri-La had ceased to exist: ‘the gentle world that we had known […] was in eclipse’ (p. x). The last chapter of Part One is ominously called ‘The veil’, referring to the watershed moment when one girl starts wearing a veil, thus bringing down the curtain, so to speak. It meant fanaticism, ‘loss of community, of personality, of one’s body’ – such is the way ‘the people of Bayu’ saw it (p. 214). In Part Two the ‘decent’, ‘tolerant’ sorts of people in Bayu are increasingly losing ground to hard-nosed ‘fanatics’ to the point where Beatty feels he has no choice but to pack his bags and go home.

Intriguingly, Beatty emphasizes that he did not want to be too closely allied with any particular group, and did not want ‘to come away with a partisan view’ (p. 202). Yet this is exactly what occurs, as he keeps revisiting his ‘friends’ (p. 108), the mystics. They are constantly praised as wonderful people, and credited with ‘the Javanese virtues of social harmony, empathy and gentleness’ (p. 200). Eventually Beatty is even ritually initiated into their sect. Conversely, he cannot stand the ‘fanatics’, which he regards as ‘the despisers of tradition’ (pp. 92-3). Talking with them is impossible, he says, as he finds it very hard not to openly show his anger (p. 247).

Why was Beatty initially so positive about Java? Firstly, I think his negative experiences in Nias in the 1980s greatly coloured his first impressions of Java. Nias is depicted as downright awful. On his first arrival in Bayu, he immediately thought, ‘This isn’t going to be too difficult. Over the next weeks, as I relaxed into Bayu’s measured rhythm, the same thought recurred. And the contrast between the poverty and drama of the tribal world – the world I had left behind – and the easy harmony of the Javanese village haunted me as I found my way in the new setting.’ (p. 12). Recalling hard times in Nias, his
wife, too, is most astonished at the warm reception in Bayu (p. 74). Secondly, he already knew beforehand that Java would be easy, because secondary literature emphasized that this was the case. Beatty’s 1999 book is deeply indebted to Geertz’s work, highlighting harmony.

By contrast, Java’s endemic violence remains in the background, and is blotted out when it comes to general theorizing. We regularly read about the atrocities surrounding the 1965 coup, and also about ‘mysterious killings’, riots, lynchings and other gruesome ‘incidents’ of the following decades, yet skeletons remain in the cupboard, and the myth of a harmonious Java is undisturbed. But what is this much-praised social harmony? It basically boils down to ‘smoothing over differences, turning a blind eye when necessary’ (p. 157). Conflicts are denied, and left unresolved. Mum is the word. Beatty is in high dudgeon over the efforts of the ‘fanatics’ to break this silence. They even resort to the megaphone to get their message across. One night, he cannot stand the pandemonium anymore, and wishes to silence the noisemaker, as he feels he has ‘to confront my nightmare: a madman rocking with a microphone, a voice that never ended’ (p. 275).

But is the ‘madman with a microphone’ really symbolic of a major crisis thundering toward us, or just the cacophony of some nervous radicals? For the average Western reader it is quite easy to identify with the first-person narrator. The idea propounded by Beatty’s mystics that the world’s religions are all essentially the same, and basically good, is nowadays common wisdom in Western popular culture, too. The ‘fanatic’, however, does not want to play along with this seemingly tolerant consensus groupthink. Beatty writes that ‘in a crowded and sociable community, “not speaking” was the commonest way of dealing with conflict. Harmony meant that some voices had to fall silent’ (p. 178). But the faithful do not want to remain silent, because for them the Divine message is much too important. If we wish to understand religious people, it is not enough to side with the gentle mystics, we must get to know the zealots too.

The second fieldwork period was a frightening time for Beatty, but what he had been living through was in fact the death throes of Suhartoism. Beatty left Java before Suharto stepped down, and writing in 2009, he does not devote a single word to the situation in Bayu today. Its story is still developing, of course, but after 1997 Bayu seems to have ceased to interest Beatty, apparently starting from the moment the dreamlike idyll in Java turned into a nightmare for him. Indonesians have dubbed the post-Suharto years the era of Reformasi, which expresses the hope that things can improve. However, Beatty’s depressing account does not even probe the possibility of a better future. For him the story seems already to have reached its end point: a shadow has fallen over Bayu, and is creeping over Java, and will finally cover Indonesia. The Dark Age has begun.
I thank the reviewers for their commendations. (I shall take Wieringa’s ‘religi-
ously oriented thriller’ – surely a first! – as a compliment, however intended.) Let me elaborate a little on my intentions and respond to the criticisms, which partly spring from puzzles over genre. As a reader, your judgements will depend on whether you take the book to be a novel, memoir, thriller, travelogue or ethnography – all terms used by the reviewers. Questions of evidence, tone and argument must differ between these distinct genres: there is no single measure of success or failure. So what was the intention? I set out to tell the story of a fieldwork, showing what it was like to live for two years in a Javanese village, with my family, as an anthropologist and villager. From this vantage, I wanted to create an intimate portrait of a tolerant and culturally diverse society as it coped with the challenge of resurgent Islam. A counter-
balance to political and historical accounts that treat only ideology and mass behaviour, the book shows how the turn to an uncompromising puritan Islam is experienced as a struggle within families, a battle between the generations and within individual consciences. That was my aim. To bring it to life I drew on the techniques of narrative non-fiction.

It matters that the book is published by an independent literary publisher, not a university press. Aside from its anthropological credentials, it has to stand on its own merits as a piece of writing, a story done in a certain way. If it does not please on an aesthetic level and hold the reader’s interest through character, incident and style, it has failed. That failure can be mine, of course: but a reader who reads against the text, as one reviewer has done, blind to its purpose and resistant to its effects – like someone who reads the Bible for laughs – is incapable of appreciating the book. Understandably in a journal of this kind, all three reviewers concentrate on what the book says to the academic community. They do not assess the way the book is written – the personal vantage, the narrative technique, the presentation of character; but literary strategy crucially affects what can be observed and said.

Let me address some specific points.

1. It doesn’t explain

‘Rich in empathy, yet lacks the power of explanation,’ writes Pak Pujo. Empathy and explanation engage their subjects on different levels: you can be convinced by an explanation, but you cannot be moved by it. There is a tension, even a contradiction, between narrative understanding and ethnographic explana-
tion (see Beatty 2010). The one concerns particular individuals and histories, the other requires abstraction and the formulation of models. Explanation, in a book of this kind, would have entailed an analytical distance, a transcending of circumstances, and a comparative stance opposed to my aims. If Pujo recognizes in the characters ‘complete human beings’, that is because they are not there to illustrate an argument or make a point -- as none of us are. Take the example of Sri, the girl who first wears a veil. Would an analysis in terms of ideology, class structure, or changing forms of piety really tell us anything new? The intriguing aspects of her ‘conversion’, its human and anthropological significance, lay in other, less typifying features. Serial adoptions, struggles between rival ‘mothers’, and inter-faith conversions set the context; so too do frustrated ambitions and a hasty marriage to an outsider. These are what make Sri’s transformation dramatically plausible. To convey the social impact of the veiling, I also needed to register the shock that her fellows felt (‘ghost’ was their image, not mine) and a shared sense of bewilderment that owed less to novelty than to the incalculable element in human motivation. To explain here would be to traduce. Nor does what seemed to everyone a fall from grace, almost a social death, lend itself to positive formulation, let alone analysis in terms of ‘agency’ or ‘new modalities of the self’, such as Michael Peletz suggests. But then Sri, unlike so many young veiled women, did not have ready-made reasons: she had not studied the role. To her family’s consternation, she would not explain herself. The girls who followed in her wake quickly learned the script, the one commonly passed on to researchers. But they, too, have their stories.

Here is the paradox: the more you explain real people, the further you stray from the meanings they create. The quiddity of particular relationships, the things that matter most, get filtered out. Yet to state the paradox is not to exclude the possibility of saying something significant about another culture. I hope that the dramas of village life bring out the dynamics of Javanese society better – more faithfully – than an intrusive voice-over. Having done the ethnographic spadework, authorial expertise, such as it is, can be concealed. You don’t need to wear your scholarship on your sleeve.

To eschew explanation is not, therefore, to limit comprehension. If a narrative does not explain, it provides a richer context and the possibility of building significance through shaping, contrasting and foregrounding. The reader will grasp connections that cannot be reduced to a causal nexus or paradigm. Plot, characterization, and shifts of scene bring the reader to an understanding different from, but not I think of a lesser kind than, those yielded by case histories, models and summaries.

2. You’ve made it up
A different kind of explanation – illegitimate to an anthropologist – is proposed by Edwin Wieringa. ‘Deeply sceptical’ of the tone of a peasant woman’s
remarks that ‘fasting dampens the passions’, he offers his own corrective inference. The words come from a ‘Quranic admonition (79:40)’. The woman was ‘just stating an elementary theological point’, not speaking regretfully or reciting a cultural cliché that might have a different local implication.

Supposing she had undergone an Islamic ‘catechism’ and was happy to emit it when the button was pressed, that might be true. Supposing she understood the teaching in orthodox terms – a further leap in rural Java – that might also be true. But to assume as much would be to regard people as innocent mouthpieces in socially colourless contexts, repositories of neutral knowledge relayed without nuance to the observer. Worse still would be to accept that the scholar in the faraway library, who knows nothing of the circumstances or the people concerned, can interpret their motivations and the way they voice them better than the man on the ground; better, indeed, than the people themselves. That strikes me as presumptuous and wrong-headed in equal measure. And let’s not forget that the passage in question – mildly humorous, too fragile for the scholarly sledgehammer – is about people more than doctrine, and there I have the advantage.

Wieringa’s scepticism extends to dialogue generally. Without superhuman powers of recall, I must have made it up (‘though it would be churlish’ to suggest as much). To be sure, most dialogue is uninteresting and quickly forgotten. But one remembers some things, and one records. Trying to recall what was said and intending to remember what is said are different skills with sharply differing results, as we remind students about to go into the field. But memory isn’t everything. Besides the usual back-of-the-envelope jottings, I have over 150 taped hours of people chatting, arguing and joking – not a vast amount for over two years in the field, but certainly enough. I can afford to select. Most readers will not miss the coughs and the squawks of passing hens.

3. Bayu isn’t representative of Java or anywhere else
Wieringa’s ferocious doubts about whether Bayu represents anything other than Bayu calls to mind Clifford Geertz’s rejoinder to ethnography’s perennial critics: ‘Anthropologists don’t study villages: they study in villages.’ The things that happen in one community happen in other, similar communities. Some of them happen in all communities. It’s the anthropologist’s job to show why they happen the way they do in Kiriwina or Modjokuto. The slur of ‘backwater’ misses its target. Anthropological locations – even the best-known – are always backwaters. Our subject is Everyman and Everywoman, locally conceived.

4. The title misleads
Like some rural diviner poking the chicken’s entrails, Wieringa worries over the title (what does shadow mean? Which heart?); he quotes the blurb; he even
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scans the publisher’s website for clues. Let’s not get distracted by what are essentially marketing matters.

An update was never on the cards: the story evolved over the period 1992 to 1997 – Suharto’s final years, the years when the Islamic revival unsettled Bayu; besides which, a narrative that interweaves the lives of a dozen characters has its own internal logic and aesthetic shape. The changes I depict – the rise of aggressive puritan Islam, the decline of a gentle syncretist culture – have happened over the long term. I make sense of them through generational conflicts. These struggles continue, but ‘what happened next?’ is not the right question. In a cultural debate that has been going on for centuries there is no last word.

6. Islam is the bogeyman
Most of the Javanese portrayed in the book count themselves as Muslims; they shared, or focused, my anxieties about the threat of the militants. To call the book ‘a scare-mongering story about Islam’ is to accept the zealots’ point, that they are the true and only believers.

7. The reporting is partisan
Pak Pujo rightly insists that the ethnographer must be balanced. In Varieties of Javanese religion, I strained to that effect, though the odd wobble will be evident. Balance meant censoring the more scabrous remarks about Islam made by village mystics. I did not want the whiff of heresy to leak back to ordinary Muslims who would take offence; nor did I want to give those less liberal a reason to act against the mystics. If, in A shadow falls, I have relaxed this restraint, it is because I am present in the story. My involvement obliged me on occasion to stand by my friends, as they stood by me. To do otherwise would have been scandalous and incomprehensible.

To tell a story from a single point of view and remain perfectly balanced is impossible, especially if one is barred from novelistic invention. Although I try to write characters in the round (even the self-caricaturing bigot Drus is presented both before and after his ‘conversion’), I do not imagine my way into their thoughts. The sole exception is on p. 272, where I attribute to Mustari, as he readies himself for the prayer-house, feelings about his impious neighbours that I heard him voice on other occasions. I used free indirect style here because I wanted to ‘justify’ a pious man’s moral stance, to present him empathetically rather than objectify him as a zealot, and because I wanted to contrast him to the detested prayer-leader Sukib (the rocking madman of my nightmare) at a stage in the story where conflict breaks out and ‘balance’ is imperilled. Nevertheless, I accept Peletz’s point that I have
not explored the puritan perspective or ‘new forms of piety’ in any depth. It was the fate of the Javanists, the irreligious, the middling Muslims, and the social compact that bound them all together that most concerned me. Their story has been trampled, in mainstream scholarship, in the rush to chart the Islamist advance.

If the puritans are less attractive as individuals than the pantheist mystics and sceptics, that is hardly my fault. (‘Fanatic’, contra Wieringa, is not my favoured word, though the loan-word fanatik – less pejorative to Javanese ears – is an epithet some happily use of themselves.) People who regard backsliders, dissenters and anthropologists as infidels unworthy of communication, or who plot their downfall, are what they are. Such people are not peculiar to Islam. But these are not the only Muslims in the book. Between the pantheists and the die-hards, a middle range of ‘ordinary Muslims’ (about whom Peletz has written excellently) should enlist the sympathy of readers. They, as much as the pantheists, are threatened by the rise of intolerant puritanism. Wieringa does them a great disservice by awarding the title of Muslim only to the conventionally pious or the extreme. In this, sadly, he joins hands with a number of Western scholars who have taken the most strident Muslims at their word and accepted their narrow definition of Islam. This is something that anthropologists, as scholars who work with people rather than texts, should never do.

The wonder of Javanese culture is in its internal diversity and in the intricate arrangements by which villagers manage that diversity through slametans, rituals, and what Hildred Geertz calls the social minuet. That the cultural compromise rests on a history of conflict hardly diminishes its value or its beauty. (Wieringa misunderstands the process as ‘keeping mum’.) So, yes, there are lessons to be learned: lessons about living with difference and about mutuality; but also about cultural resilience. As the tide of orthodoxy advances, Java has more to lose than most other Muslim societies. Not just for Java’s sake but for ours too, I am keen not to see its entrancing social experiment buried, whether by reformists or by their scholarly interpreters. The bogeyman is not Islam; it is an intolerance that would sweep away diversity and deny the chance of Javanists and Muslims of all stripes to carry on – and carry on with each other – in their own sweet way.

Reference

Beatty, Andrew